

Exposition on Psalm 42

by St. Augustine

The sermon explores the universal human experience of longing for God and the importance of hope in God as the source of strength and comfort.

Scripture: Colossians 1:24

Topics: "Longing For God", "Spiritual Unity"

Description

St. Augustine preaches on the longing of the soul for God, using the imagery of a hart thirsting for water-brooks to symbolize the Church's desire for God's grace. He delves into the significance of the Psalms title 'On the end: a Psalms for understanding for the sons of Korah,' relating it to Christians being sons of Christ. St. Augustine emphasizes the need to destroy vices like serpents to intensify the longing for God's truth. He highlights the importance of unity in bearing one another's burdens, drawing parallels to the harts supporting each other's heads. The sermon explores the concept of pouring out one's soul above oneself to seek God and the significance of hope and confession in times of disquiet and trouble.

Transcript

1. We have undertaken the exposition of a Psalm corresponding to your own longings, on which we propose to speak to you. For the Psalm itself begins with a certain pious longing; and he who sings so, says, Like as the hart desires the water-brooks, so longs my soul after You, O God Psalm 41:1. Who is it then that says this? It is ourselves, if we be but willing! And why ask, who it is other than yourself, when it is in your power to be the thing which you are asking about? It is not however one individual, but it is One Body; but Christ's Body is the Church. Colossians 1:24 Such longing indeed is not found in all who enter the Church: let all however who have tasted the sweetness of the Lord, and who own in Christ that for which they have a relish, think that they are not the only ones; but that there are such seeds scattered throughout the field of the Lord, this whole earth: and that there is a certain Christian unity, whose voice thus speaks, Like as the hart desires the water-brooks, so longs my soul after You, O God. And indeed it is not ill understood as the cry of those, who being as yet Catechumens, are hastening to the grace of the holy Font. On which account too this Psalm is ordinarily chanted on those occasions, that they may long for the Fountain of remission of sins, even as the hart for the water-brooks. Let this be allowed; and this meaning retain its place in the Church; a place both truthful and sanctioned by usage. Nevertheless, it appears to me, my brethren, that such a longing is not fully satisfied even in the faithful in Baptism: but that haply, if they know where they are sojourning, and whither they have to remove from hence, their longing is kindled in even greater intensity.

2. The title then of it is, On the end: a Psalm for understanding for the sons of Korah. We have met with the sons of Korah in other titles of Psalms: and remember to have discussed and stated already the meaning of this name. Yet we must even now take notice of this title in such a way, that what we have said already should be no prejudice against our saying it again: for all were not present in every place where we said it. Now Korah may have been, as indeed he was, a certain definite person; and have had sons, who might be called the sons of Korah; let us however search for the secret of which this is the sacrament, that this name may bring to light the mystery with which it is pregnant. For there is some great mystery in the matter that the name sons of Korah is given to Christians. Why sons of Korah? They are sons of the bridegroom, sons of Christ. Why then does Korah stand for Christ? Because Korah is equivalent to Calvaria....Therefore, the sons of the bridegroom, the sons of His Passion, the sons redeemed by His Blood, the sons of His Cross, who bear on their forehead that which His enemies erected on Calvary, are called the sons of Korah; to them is this Psalm sung as a Psalm for understanding. Let then our understanding be roused: and if the Psalm be sung to us, let us follow it with our understanding....Run to the brooks; long after the water-brooks. With God is the fountain of Life; a fountain that shall never be dried up: in His Light is a Light that shall never be darkened. Long thou for this light: for a certain fountain, a certain light, such as your bodily eyes know not; a light to see which the inward eye must be prepared; a fountain, to drink of which the inward thirst is to be kindled. Run to the fountain; long for the fountain; but do it not anyhow, be not satisfied with running like any ordinary animal; run thou like the hart. What is meant by like the hart? Let there be no sloth in your running; run with all your might: long for the fountain with all your might. For we find in the hart an emblem of swiftness.

3. But perhaps Scripture meant us to consider in the stag not this point only, but another also. Hear what else there is in the hart. It destroys serpents, and after the killing of serpents, it is inflamed with thirst yet more violent; having destroyed serpents, it runs to the water-brooks, with thirst more keen than before. The serpents are your vices, destroy the serpents of iniquity; then will you long yet more for the Fountain of Truth. Perhaps avarice whispers in your ear some dark counsel, hisses against the word of God, hisses against the commandment of God. And since it is said to you, Disregard this or that thing, if you prefer working iniquity to despising some temporal good, you choose to be bitten by a serpent, rather than destroy it. Whilst, therefore, you are yet indulgent to your vice, your covetousness or your appetite, when am I to find in you a longing such as this, that might make you run to the water-brooks?...

4. There is another point to be observed in the hart. It is reported of stags...that when they either wander in the herds, or when they are swimming to reach some other parts of the earth, that they support the burdens of their heads on each other, in such a manner as that one takes the lead, and others follow, resting their heads upon him, as again others who follow do upon them, and others in succession to the very end of the herd; but the one who took the lead in bearing the burden of their heads, when tired, returns to the rear, and rests himself after his fatigue by supporting his head just as did the others; by thus supporting what is burdensome, each in turn, they both accomplish their journey, and do not abandon each other. Are they not a kind of harts that the Apostle addresses, saying, Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the Law of Christ? Galatians 6:2 ...

5. My soul is thirsty for the living God Psalm 41:2. What I am saying, that as the hart pants after the water-brooks, so longs my soul after You, O God, means this, My soul is thirsty for the living God. For what is it thirsty? When shall I come and appear before God? This it is for which I am thirsty, to come and to appear before Him. I am thirsty in my pilgrimage, in my running; I shall be filled on my arrival. But When shall I come? And this, which is soon in the sight of God, is late to our longing. When shall I come and

appear before God? This too proceeds from that longing, of which in another place comes that cry, One thing have I desired of the Lord; that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. Wherefore so? That I may behold (he says) the beauty of the Lord. When shall I come and appear before the Lord?...

6. My tears have been my meat day and night, while they daily say unto me, Where is your God? Psalm 41:3. My tears (he says) have been not bitterness, but my bread. Those very tears were sweet unto me: being thirsty for that fountain, inasmuch as I was not as yet able to drink of it, I have eagerly made my tears my meat. For he said not, My tears became my drink, lest he should seem to have longed for them, as for the water-brooks: but, still retaining that thirst wherewith I burn, and by which I am hurried away towards the water-brooks, My tears became my meat, while I am not yet there. And assuredly he does but the more thirst for the water-brooks from making his tears his meat....And they daily say unto me, Where is your God? For if a Pagan should say this to me, I cannot retort it upon him, saying, Where is yours? inasmuch as he points with his finger to some stone, and says, Lo, there is my God! When I have laughed at the stone, and he who pointed to it has been put to the blush, he raises his eyes from the stone, looks up to heaven, and perhaps says, pointing his finger to the Sun, Behold there my God! Where, I pray, is your God? He has found something to point out to the eyes of the flesh; whereas I, on my part, not that I have not a God to show to him, cannot show him what he has no eyes to see. For he indeed could point out to my bodily eyes his God, the Sun; but what eyes has he to which I might point out the Creator of the Sun?...

7. I thought on these things, and poured out my soul above myself Psalm 41:4. When would my soul attain to that object of its search, which is above my soul, if my soul were not to pour itself out above itself? For were it to rest in itself, it would not see anything else beyond itself; and in seeing itself, would not, for all that, see God. Let then my insulting enemies now say, Where is your God? aye, let them say it! I, so long as I do not see, so long as my happiness is postponed, make my tears my bread day and night. Let them still say, Where is your God? I seek my God in every corporeal nature, terrestrial or celestial, and find Him not: I seek His Substance in my own soul, and I find it not, yet still I have thought on these things, and wishing to see the invisible things of my God, being understood by the things made, Romans 1:20 I have poured forth my soul above myself, and there remains no longer any being for me to attain to, save my God. For it is there is the house of my God. His dwelling-place is above my soul; from thence He beholds me; from thence He created me; from thence He directs me and provides for me; from thence he appeals to me, and calls me, and directs me; leads me in the way, and to the end of my way.. ..

8. For when I was pouring out my soul above myself, in order to reach my God, why did I do so? For I will go into the place of Your Tabernacle. For I should be in error were I to seek for my God without the place of His tabernacle. For I will go into the place of Your wonderful tabernacle, even unto the house of God.

I will go, he says, into the place of the wonderful tabernacle, even unto the house of God! For there are already many things that I admire in the tabernacle. See how great wonders I admire in the tabernacle! For God's tabernacle on earth is the faithful; I admire in them the obedience of even their bodily members: that in them Sin does not reign so that they should obey its lusts; neither do they yield their members instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but unto the living God in good works.

Romans 6:12-13 I admire the sight of the bodily members warring in the service of the soul that serves God....And wonderful though the tabernacle be, yet when I come to the house of God, I am even struck dumb with astonishment. Of that house he speaks in another Psalm, after he had put a certain abstruse

and difficult question to himself (viz., why is it that it generally goes well with the wicked on earth, and ill with the good?), saying, I thought to know this; it is too painful for me, until I go into the sanctuary of God, and understand of the last things.

For it is there, in the sanctuary of God, in the house of God, is the fountain of understanding. There he understood of the last things; and solved the question concerning the prosperity of the unrighteous, and the sufferings of the righteous. How does he solve it? Why, that the wicked, when reprieved here, are reserved for punishments without end; and the good when they suffer here, are being tried in order that they may in the end obtain the inheritance. And it was in the sanctuary of God that he understood this, and understood of the last things....For he tells us of his progress, and of his guidance there; as if we had been saying, You are admiring the tabernacle here on earth; how came you to the sanctuary of the house of God? he says, In the voice of joy and praise; the sound of keeping holiday.

Here, when men keep festival simply for their own indulgence, it is their custom to place musical instruments, or to station a chorus of singers, before their houses, or any kind of music that serves and allures to wantonness. And when these are heard, what do we passers by say? What is going on here? And we are told in answer, that it is some festival. It is a birthday that is being celebrated (say they), there is a marriage here; that those songs may not appear out of place, but the luxurious indulgence may be excused by the festive occasion.

In the house of God there is a never-ending festival: for there it is not an occasion celebrated once, and then to pass away. The angelic choir makes an eternal holiday: the presence of God's face, joy that never fails. This is a holiday of such a kind, as neither to be opened by any dawn, nor terminated by any evening. From that everlasting perpetual festivity, a certain sweet and melodious strain strikes on the ears of the heart, provided only the world do not drown the sounds. As he walks in this tabernacle, and contemplates God's wonderful works for the redemption of the faithful, the sound of that festivity charms his ears, and bears the hart away to the water-brooks.

9. But seeing, brethren, so long as we are at home in this body, we are absent from the Lord; 2 Corinthians 5:6 and the corruptible body presses down the soul, and the earthly tabernacle weighs down the mind that muses on many things; Wisdom 9:15 even though we have some way or other dispersed the clouds, by walking as longing leads us on, and for a brief while have come within reach of that sound, so that by an effort we may catch something from that house of God, yet through the burden, so to speak, of our infirmity, we sink back to our usual level, and relapse to our ordinary state. And just as there we found cause for rejoicing, so here there will not be wanting an occasion for sorrow. For that hart that made tears its bread day and night, borne along by longing to the water-brooks (that is, to the spiritual delights of God), pouring forth his soul above himself, that he may attain to what is above his own soul, walking towards the place of the wonderful tabernacle, even unto the house of God, and led on by the sweetness of that inward spiritual sound to feel contempt for all outward things, and be borne on to things spiritual, is but a mortal man still; is still groaning here, still bearing about the frailty of flesh, still in peril in the midst of the offenses Matthew 18:7 of this world. He therefore glances back to himself, as if he were coming from that world; and says to himself, now placed in the midst of these sorrows, comparing these with the things, to see which he had entered in there, and after seeing which he had come forth from thence;

Why art you cast down, O my soul, and why do you disquiet me? Psalm 41:5. Lo, we have just now been gladdened by certain inward delights: with the mind's eye we have been able to behold, though but with a momentary glance, something not susceptible of change: why do you still disquiet me, why are you still

cast down? For you do not doubt of your God. For now you are not without somewhat to say to yourself, in answer to those who say, Where is your God? I have now had the perception of something that is unchangeable; why do you disquiet me still?

Hope in God. Just as if his soul was silently replying to him, Why do I disquiet you, but because I am not yet there, where that delight is, to which I was, as it were, rapt for a moment? Am I already 'drinking' from this 'fountain' with nothing to fear?...Still Hope in God, is his answer to the soul that disquiets him, and would fain account for her disquiet from the evils with which this world abounds. In the mean while dwell in hope: for hope that is seen is not hope; but if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:24-25

10. Hope in God. Why hope? For I will confess unto Him. What will you confess? My God is the saving health of my countenance. My health (my salvation) cannot be from myself; this it is that I will say, that I will confess. It is my God that is the saving health of my countenance. For to account for his fears, in the midst of those things, which he now knows, having come after a sort to the understanding of them, he has been looking behind him again in anxiety, lest the enemy be stealing upon him: he cannot yet say, I am made whole every whit. For having but the first-fruits of the Spirit, we groan within ourselves; waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body. Romans 8:23 When that health (that salvation) is perfected in us, then shall we be living in the house of God for ever, and praising for ever Him to whom it was said, Blessed are they that dwell in Your house, they will be praising You world without end. This is not so yet, because the salvation which is promised, is not as yet in being; but it is in hope that I confess unto God, and say, My God is the saving health of my countenance. For it is in hope that we are saved; but hope that is seen, is not hope....

11. My soul is disquieted on account of myself Psalm 41:6. Is it disquieted on account of God? It is on my own account it is disquieted. By the Unchangeable it was revived; it is by the changeable it is disquieted. I know that the righteousness of God remains; whether my own will remain steadfast, I know not. For I am alarmed by the Apostle's saying, Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall. 1 Corinthians 10:12 Therefore since there is no soundness in me for myself, there is no hope either for me of myself. My soul is disquieted on account of myself....Therefore I remember You, O Lord, from the land of Jordan, and from the little hill of Hermon. From whence did I remember you? From the little hill, and from the land of Jordan. Perhaps from Baptism, where the remission of sins is given. For no one runs to the remission of sins, except he who is dissatisfied with himself; no one runs to the remission of sins, but he who confesses himself a sinner; no one confesses himself a sinner, except by humbling himself before God. Therefore it is from the land of Jordan I have remembered you, and from the hill; observe, not of the great hill, that you may make of the little hill a great one: for whoso exalts himself shall be abased, and whoso humbles himself shall be exalted. If you would also ask the meanings of the names, Jordan means their descent. Descend then, that you may be lifted up: be not lifted up, lest you be cast down. And the little hill of Hermon. Hermon means anathematizing. Anathematize yourself, by being displeased with yourself; for if you are pleased with yourself, God will be displeased with you. Because then God gives us all good things, because He Himself is good, not because we are worthy of it; because He is merciful, not because we have in anything deserved it; it is from the land of Jordan, and from Hermon, that I remember you. And because he so remembers with humility, he shall earn his exaltation to fruition, for he is not exalted in himself, who glories in the Lord.

12. Deep calls unto deep with the voice of your water-spouts Psalm 41:7. I may perhaps finish the Psalm, aided as I am by your attention, whose fervour I perceive. As for your fatigue in hearing, I am not greatly

solicitous, since you see me also, who speak, toiling in the heat of these exertions. Assuredly it is from your seeing me labouring, that you labour with me: for I am labouring not for myself, but for you. Deep calls unto deep with the voice of your water-spouts. It was God whom he addressed, who remembered him from the land of Jordan and Hermon. It was in wonder and admiration he spoke this: Abyss calls unto abyss with the voice of Your water-spouts. What abyss is this that calls, and to what other abyss? Justly, because the understanding spoken of is an abyss. For an abyss is a depth that cannot be reached or comprehended; and it is principally applied to a great body of water. For there is a depth, a profound, the bottom of which cannot be reached by sounding. Furthermore, it is said in a certain passage, Your judgments are a mighty abyss, Scripture meaning to suggest that the judgments of God are incomprehensible. What then is the abyss that calls, and to what other abyss does it call? If by abyss we understand a great depth, is not man's heart, do you not suppose, an abyss? For what is there more profound than that abyss? Men may speak, may be seen by the operations of their members, may be heard speaking in conversation: but whose thought is penetrated, whose heart seen into? What he is inwardly engaged on, what he is inwardly capable of, what he is inwardly doing or what purposing, what he is inwardly wishing to happen, or not to happen, who shall comprehend? I think an abyss may not unreasonably be understood of man, of whom it is said elsewhere, Man shall come to a deep heart, and God shall be exalted. If man then is an abyss, in what way does abyss call on abyss? Does man call on man as God is called upon? No, but calls on is equivalent to calls to him. For it was said of a certain person, he calls on death; Wisdom 1:16 that is, lives in such a way as to be inviting death; for there is no man at all who puts up a prayer, and calls expressly on death: but men by evil-living invite death. Deep calls on deep, then, is, man calls to man. Thus is it wisdom is learned, and thus faith, when man calls to man. The holy preachers of God's word call on the deep: are they not themselves a deep also?...

13. Deep calls to deep with the voice of Your water-spouts. I, who tremble all over, when my soul was disquieted on account of myself, feared greatly on account of Your judgments....Are those judgments slight ones? They are great ones, severe, hard to bear; but would they were all. Deep calls to deep with the voice of Your water-spouts, in that Thou threatenest, You say, that there is another condemnation in store even after those sufferings. Deep calls on deep with the voice of Your water-spouts. Whither then shall I go from Your presence? And whither shall I flee from Your Spirit? seeing that deep calls to deep, and after those sufferings severer ones are to be dreaded.

14. All Your overhangings and Your waves have come upon me. The waves in what I already feel, the overhangings in that You denouncest. All my sufferings are Your waves; all Your denouncements of judgments are Your overhangings. In the waves that deep calls; in the overhangings is the other deep which it calls to. In this that I suffer are all Your waves; in the severer punishment that Thou threatenest, all Your overhangings have come unto me. For He who threatens does not let His judgments fall upon us, but keeps them suspended over us. But inasmuch as You sit at liberty, I have thus spoken unto my soul. Hope in God: for I will confess unto Him. My God is the saving health of my countenance. The more numerous my sufferings, the sweeter will be Your mercy.

15. Therefore follows: The Lord will commend His loving-kindness in the day-time; and in the night-time will He declare it Psalm 41:8. In tribulation no man has leisure to hear: attend, when it is well with you; hear, when it is well with you; learn, when you are in tranquillity, the discipline of wisdom, and store up the word of God as you do food. For in tribulation every one must be profited by what he heard in the time of security. For in prosperity God commends to you His mercy, in case thou serve Him faithfully, for He frees you from tribulation; but it is in the night only that He declares His mercy to you, which He commended to

you by day. When tribulation shall actually come, He will not leave you destitute of His help; He will show you that which He commended to you in the daytime is true. For it is written in a certain passage, The mercy of the Lord is seasonable in the time of affliction, as clouds of rain in the time of drought. The Lord has commended His loving-kindness in the day-time, and in the night will He declare it. He does not show that He is your Helper, unless tribulation come, from whence you must be rescued by Him who promised it to you in the day-time. Therefore we are warned to be like the ant. For just as worldly prosperity is signified by the day, adversity by the night, so again in another way worldly prosperity is expressed by the summer, adversity by the winter. And what is it that the ant does? She lays up in summer what will be useful to her in winter. Whilst therefore it is summer, while it is well with you, while you are in tranquillity, hear the word of the Lord. For how can it be that in the midst of these tempests of the world, you should pass through the whole of that sea, without suffering? How could it happen? To what mortal's lot has it fallen? If even it has been the lot of any, that very calm is more to be dreaded. The Lord has commended His loving-kindness in the day-time, and in the night-time will He declare it....There is with me prayer unto the God of my life. This I make my business here; I who am the hart thirsting and longing for the water-brooks, calling to mind the sweetness of that strain, by which I was led on through the tabernacle even to the house of God; while this corruptible body presses down the soul, Wisdom 9:15 there is yet with me prayer unto the God of my life. For in order to making supplication unto God, I have not to buy anything from places beyond the sea; or in order that He may hear me, have I to sail to bring from a distance frankincense and perfumes, or have I to bring calf or ram from the flock. There is with me prayer to the God of my life. I have within a victim to sacrifice; I have within an incense to place on the altar; I have within a sacrifice wherewith to propitiate my God. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit. What sacrifice of a troubled spirit I have within, hear.

16. I will say unto God, You are my lifter up. Why have You forgotten me? Psalm 41:9. For I am suffering here, even as if You had forgotten me. But You are trying me, and I know that Thou dost but put off, not take utterly from me, what You have promised me. But yet, Why have You forgotten me? So cried our Head also, as if speaking in our name. My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? I will say unto God, You are my lifter up; why have You forgotten me?

17. Why have You rejected me? Rejected me, that is to say, from that height of the apprehension of the unchangeable Truth. Why have You rejected me? Why, when already longing for those things, have I been cast down to these, by the weight and burden of my iniquity? This same voice in another passage said, I said in my trance (i.e., in my rapture, when he had seen some great thing or other), I said in my trance, I am cast out of the sight of Your eyes. For he compared these things in which he found himself, to those toward which he had been raised; and saw himself cast out far from the sight of God's eyes, as he speaks even here, Why have You rejected me? Why go I mourning, while mine enemy troubles me, while he breaks my bones? Even he, my tempter, the devil; while offenses are everywhere on the increase, because of the abundance of which the love of many is waxing cold. Matthew 24:12 When we see the strong members of the Church generally giving way to the causes of offense, does not Christ's body say, The enemy breaks my bones? For it is the strong members that are the bones; and sometimes even those that are strong sink under their temptations. For whosoever of the body of Christ considers this, does he not exclaim, with the voice of Christ's Body, Why have You rejected me? Why go I mourning, while mine enemy troubles me, while he breaks my bones?

You may see not my flesh merely, but even my bones. To see those who were thought to have some stability, giving way under temptations, so that the rest of the weak brethren despair when they see those

who are strong succumbing; how great, my brethren, are the dangers!

18. They who trouble me cast me in the teeth. Again that voice! While they say daily unto me, Where is your God? Psalm 41:10. And it is principally in the temptations of the Church they say this, Where is your God? How much was this cast in the teeth of the Martyrs! Those men so patient and courageous for the name of Christ, how often was it said to them, Where is your God? Let Him deliver you, if He can. For men saw their torments outwardly; they did not inwardly behold their crowns! They who trouble me cast me in the teeth, while they say daily unto me, Where is your God? And on this account, seeing my soul is disquieted on account of myself, what else should I say unto it than those words:

Why art you cast down, O my soul; and why do you disquiet me? Psalm 41:11. And, as it seems to answer, Would you not have me disquiet you, placed as I am here in so great evils? Would you have me not disquiet you, panting as I am after what is good, thirsting and labouring as I am for it? What should I say, but,

Hope thou in God; for I will yet confess unto Him Psalm 41:11. He states the very words of that confession; he repeats the grounds on which he fortifies his hope. He is the health of my countenance, and my God.

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